

Intellectual Control and Accessibility in Archival Processing: A Comparison of Two Sets of Organizational Records

by

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“The FSC/LAF is the heart and soul of the current African American cooperative movement.”

– Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard¹

Dr. Gordon Nembhard’s description of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) in her book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, sums up nicely what archivists at the Amistad Research Center have known for decades: the important, yet unacknowledged importance of the organization’s role in African American and Southern U.S. History. However, how does a small community-based, non-profit archive, with limited staff and funding resources, provide access to what was for many years, a vast and largely inaccessible set of records. The records of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) and the Emergency Land Fund (ELF) had encompassed almost 800 record storage boxes of extremely disheveled and loose historical and not-so-historical documents without even basic inventories that allow for access to researchers. The FSC/LAF and ELF represent some of the largest sets of organizational records documenting the Southern cooperative movement and Black land ownership and agriculture held by cultural heritage institutions in the United States.²

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) was founded in 1967 during a meeting of twenty-two low-income cooperatives and credit unions that was sponsored by The Southern Regional Council and The Cooperative League of the USA. The Federation was formed to promote the cause of the assembled organizations and was charged with providing technical assistance, information, training, and research to limited resource cooperatives in fourteen southern states. It

¹ Jessica Gordon Nembhard. “The Federation of Southern Cooperatives: The Legacy Lives On,” in *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press 2014), 194.

² The FSC/LAF records comprise 481 linear feet and the ELF records comprise 136 linear feet. The only identified collection of comparable size is the Southern Tenant Farmers Union records at the University of North Carolina, which comprise 154.5 linear feet. A search of WorldCat and ArchiveGrid reveals reference to small sets of FSC/LAF-related records in five collections of papers of individuals associated with the organizations (three at Emory University and one each at New York Public Library and Louisiana State University).

eventually grew to over 20,000 members, representing seventy-five local cooperatives and credit unions throughout the South, making it the largest and most important community development project that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Emergency Land Fund (ELF) was founded in 1972 by the economist Robert S. Browne following a study conducted by Browne and staff of the Black Economic Research Center. This study, entitled *Only Six Million Acres*, was eventually published in 1973 and documented the rapid decline in the amount of rural Southern land owned by African Americans throughout the twentieth century from 15 million acres in 1910 to six million in 1970. By the mid-1970s, this rate of decline would approach half a million acres annually. ELF sought to promote the retention and acquisition of land by African Americans and to teach rural Blacks about property and mineral rights, how to solicit government and private development money, and related services. The Fund also worked to expose land fraud that affected African American landowners, mostly notably the lack of Black representation on the planning boards that led to the construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and its effects on rural Blacks in northern Alabama. The FSC and ELF merged in 1985 to form the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF). The organization now represents 133 low-income cooperatives focused predominantly on black farming, small business, and health care throughout the Deep South.

The Importance of Appraisal

Within the past 10 years, there has been an increased interest in analyzing agricultural and land ownership history in the southern United States by humanities scholars. Recent scholarly monographs by Andrew W. Kahrl (2012), Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014), Alec Hickmott (2016), and Monica M. White (2018) have evidenced this.³ In addition to academic scholarship, journalists and activists are engaging more with topics ranging from sustainable food production and consumption, to the decolonization of foodways, to the growth of urban farming and the future of small family farms. With support from the Ford Foundation, *The Guardian* newspaper profiled African American farmers in Virginia and Louisiana in April 2019 as part of an in-depth reporting

³ Andrew W. Kahrl. *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt*. Harvard University Press, 2012; Jessica Gordon Nembhard. *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014; Alec F. Hickmott. "Black Land, Black Capital: Rural Development in the Shadows of the Sunbelt South, 1969-1976," *Journal of African American History* (Fall 2016); Monica M. White. *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

project on inequality in the United States. A month later, *The Huffington Post* examined the prejudice within U.S. agricultural history and the movement to rectify that history.⁴ A growing number of meetings, workshops, and symposia are addressing these issues, including the 2016 Decolonizing Foodways Symposium sponsored by the Sustainable Agriculture Education Association and the ongoing Black-Indigenous-People of Color Farming in Relationship with Earth (BIPOC-FIRE) workshops run Soul Fire Farm in New York.

The records of FSC/LAF and ELF have repeatedly been requested by a growing number of researchers (45 in the past five years), including university graduate students and faculty, but also attorneys, activists, documentary filmmakers, and policymakers interested in the history of African American land ownership and the development of rural cooperatives.⁵ Researchers are increasingly attempting to investigate the records, even with limited access. The records have been utilized to a limited degree by graduate students and faculty from institutions such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Mississippi, the City College of New York, Emory University, and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Virginia. Recent years have also seen increasing need for access to the records by current FSC/LAF staff, as well as organizations, such as the Black Belt Justice Center and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, that work toward similar objectives and goals or conduct research in the area of agricultural history.

What ARC archivists did know was that the first deposit received in 1985 of the Emergency Land Fund (ELF) records was donated by founder, Robert S. Browne, who was at that time the director of the Twenty-First Century Foundation in New York City. Though the original size of the ELF records at that time isn't known, the records were sent down to the FSC/LAF main facilities in Epes, Alabama, into the care of John Zippert, FSC/LAF's Director of Program

⁴ Summer Sewell. "There Were Nearly a Million Black Farmers in 1920. Why Have They Disappeared?" *The Guardian*. 29 April 2019; Marissa Evans. "Black Farmers Are Trying to End Centuries of Racism in America's Food System." *The Huffington Post*. 23 May 2019.

⁵ This number represents researchers who have visited ARC and consulted a small portion of processed and accessible records related to FSC/LAF and ELF, but reflects only a fraction of inquiries received regarding accessibility of the larger set of records discussed in this proposal. It is ARC's experience that the processing of such records and the creation of online finding aids lead to a substantial increase in researcher interest. As an example, ARC's recent work to increase access to comparable organizational records of the American Committee on Africa/Africa Fund led to a 300% increase in researcher requests for those collections, making them some of the most heavily consulted collections at ARC today. Given growing researcher interest in the FSC/LAF and ELF records, we anticipate a similar increase in researcher requests for those collections.

Operations, who was responsible for forwarding the records to the Amistad Research Center. What we do know is that the ELF records were accessioned at the time of deposit, but not archivally appraised or inventoried. In the end, ELF's collection made up 135 boxes, which were housed at ARC's off-site storage facility and largely inaccessible to researchers.

The records of the FSC/LAF were stored for many years in a barn in rural Alabama prior to their arrival at ARC, thus, the organizational and preservation issues for the collection were many. The initial donation of the records for the FSC/LAF was received in 1988, with continued additions received in 1991 and 2003. Again, there was a brief accession record with a note on the size of the collection at approximately 600 boxes available dated 1985, though according to the correspondence between Dr. Clifton Johnson, ARC's Executive Director and John Zippert, ARC staff picked up the records from Epes, Alabama, in the summer of 1988. There are also remarks within Johnson's correspondence regarding the fact the FSC/LAF records' original order was non-existent and Johnson was seeking Zippert's assistance on how ARC should organize the materials. Reading the correspondence within ARC's collection file was particularly eye-opening, noting a number of site visits by ARC staff, the disorganized state of the collection housed in Epes, and plans to seek funding to allow ARC to organize the records. With a gap in the collection file correspondence of almost seven years, it is unknown what the status of the collection was during most of the nineteen nineties.

An attempt was made to start organizing the FSC/LAF records starting in 1997, but beyond approximately, 85 linear feet of the collection that ARC staff were able to arrange and inventory by June 1999, no other work on the records was done, leaving the bulk – over 600 linear feet – inaccessible. As previously stated, ARC archivists were very aware of the historical significance of the work of the FSC/LAF and ELF, but the sheer size of the records, their disorganization, and in some cases soiled state, impeded tackling such a large project for such a small institution.

Historical Context, Collections Surveys, and Accessibility

ARC has always been small in staff and funding resources, but big on collections. It is the oldest and largest independent archive of original materials that reference the social and cultural importance of America's ethnic and racial history, the African Diaspora, human relations, and civil rights in the United States. ARC on average throughout its over fifty year history has five to seven full-time archivists and curators divided between its divisions of archives and manuscripts, library

and research services, and fine art collections. This has left only two to three full-time archivists working with organizing the paper-based collections at any one time, with occasional part-time student interns for assistance. However, given its size, all staff have also engaged in various center-wide activities, including fundraising, programming, exhibitions, beyond their specific job titles and duties. Therefore, undertaking a project the size and condition of the FSC/LAF records was not feasible due to staffing and funding, even though ARC's archival and curatorial team recognized the historical importance of the records. The question prior to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 and after was how to go about handling an extremely unorganized collection of such physical scope. That question was not answered until mid-2008.

Although ARC's collections were spared much of the devastation faced by New Orleans and its cultural heritage institutions following the levee failures resulting from Hurricane Katrina, it did cause the displacement of ninety percent of the staff, with only three staff members returning to manage the institution afterward. Work to gain back staff resources took a few years, but by the end of 2008, staffing of archivist positions began to approach ARC's pre-Katrina levels. With new and enthusiastic archival staff and two pre-Katrina administrative members, the focus was fully on the archival program and how to move forward to address an extensive backlog of inaccessible collections, not only smaller personal manuscripts collections, but also a number of large organizational records collections that had researchers waiting for access. Plans were made and funding was sought to address a number of collection management issues including acquisitions, archival processing (arrangement, description, and preservation), and audiovisual reformatting and preservation.

The Council of Library and Information Resources (CLIR) funded a hidden collections project at ARC in 2009, which included the implementation of new policies and procedures and collections management software that addressed all areas of the archival management program. The project provided ARC with a platform for effective and efficient workflows in its collections processing and preservation program. This, in turn, led ARC to address the issues related to processing large collections of organizational records that had caused apprehension for such a small staff previously. Again, ARC received funding from CLIR in 2011 that focused on the archival organization and description of two large sets of related organizational records. The project, *Access to Africana Collections: The American Committee on Africa and The Africa Fund Records* was the first time ARC addressed the inaccessibility of extremely large organizational

collections encompassing more than 600 boxes of historical records held at the repository. These two projects over the course of six years allowed ARC to adapt its workflows to the processing of large organizational records, such as those of the FSC/LAF and ELF.

ARC received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Humanities Collections and Reference Resources (HCRR) Foundation Grant project in 2018. This one-year project, from May 2018 to April 2019, encompassed the completion of a collection survey with content analysis of the FSC/LAF and ELF records. The primary goal of this Foundation project was to prepare ARC to complete the final archival processing of the collections over a period of three years in the not too distant future. The year of work on this project has resulted in the completion of over 615 linear feet of FSC/LAF and ELF records surveyed. The results include container listings identifying not only content, but series, sub-series, and file groupings for the collections. Additionally, FSC/LAF officers and their functions, as well as the organizational structure have been identified providing the foundation for two detailed processing action plans generated to implement full archival processing.

All archives and manuscripts collections are unique and different and are often treated that way by archivists. However, when it comes to organizational records and archival arrangement there are commonalities no matter how different two organizations may be. The ARC processing team benefited from the existing organization and of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and The Africa Fund (AF) collections. These two large collections had an original order and the provenance (creator) for each part of the collections identifiable during the initial collection surveys. Additionally, communications with ACOA/AF's administrative staff closing down the organization was vigorous with ARC's archival team. It was known early on how the organizations were run, how they kept their files, and who were the main officers and staff involved. Identifying the collections' original order and provenance, as well as identifying the overall arrangement to be applied was not difficult, nor was physically pulling specific parts of the records for a small archival team of two archivists and one graduate assistant to complete the work over the course of a three year period.

The records of the FSC/LAF without any accessibility were and are a very different beast in terms of starting to arrange, describe, and preserve the collection. Thus, the opportunity to submit a proposal to NEH for a one-year Foundation project to gain much needed intellectual

control over the collection, provide access to researchers through preliminary container listings, as well as prepare plans to implement full processing and preservation was the logical first step.

The records of organizations will always have general sets of documentation that can be defined for the functions of the organization, such as the foundation documents of by-laws and articles of incorporation; board of directors correspondence, agendas, and minutes of meetings; an overarching administrator in the form of an executive director or president; and various departments or divisions and the individuals who coordinate the work. ARC's archival team knew at the beginning we would need to preliminarily define these areas of function to FSC/LAF to determine how the records were generated and apply an order based on function that would reflect to some extent how the records were created and used.

Historical context at the start of any archival processing project whether for personal papers or organizational records is important to plan how the arrangement of documents will happen. Research into the available history of the FSC/LAF through evaluation of the part of the collection inventoried twenty-years ago and the preliminary descriptions available was a way to start. Communication with current officers and staff, as well as studying the FSC/LAF's current organizational structure and offices via their website was also helpful. Additionally, pulling some of the annual reports from the inventoried portion of the records gave the archival team a good overview to analyze the various functions of the organization and identify the various administrative and departmental units, and officers and staff throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Luckily, by the time the project had started in 2018, ARC had received a copy of the FSC/LAF's 50th anniversary souvenir booklet, *Federation of Southern Cooperatives-Land Assistance Fund: 50 Years of Courage, Cooperation Commitment and Community*. This 2017 publication highlighted the organization's storied history and continuing work. The previous research, as well as an evaluation on how ARC archivists in the past worked on the collection, determined a preliminary arrangement of file groupings to create a living series outline for the team to get started on the collection survey.

Exploration of the history of an organization prior to attempting to tackle arrangement of any collections is extremely important at the start of an archival processing project. Understanding the organization's mission and understanding the focus of the work of the departments, programs, projects, and staff involved is always a necessary first step in applying order to chaos. The work done by past ARC archivists in the late 1990s showed the records had been sorted somewhat into

four broad subject groups: Writings, Financials, Publications, and Staff and Client Files. These broad groups did not reflect at all, the organizational structure of the FSC/LAF, but they did allow the processing team to determine to some extent what would be found within the boxes.

The initial series outline generated during the research phase laid out five main series of files: 1) Administration, or records from the headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia; 2) Alabama Office and the Rural Research and Training Center in Epes, Alabama; 3) Programs and Projects; 4) Financial Records; 5) and Publications and Ephemera, both generated by FSC/LAF and collected. Within these broad categories, the team knew there would be specific sub-series of records that would need to be preliminarily sorted into file groups under the main series. Starting at the beginning with the first box, ARC's processing team utilized simple programs of MS Word for the container listing and MS Excel to generate a sort-able spreadsheet with column categories for Series, Sub-Series, Box Number, Description, and Date Range. The container list categories coincided with the spreadsheet's categories but included additional information for file groupings, plus detailed content descriptions that often included main correspondents or the individual creator if identified, and descriptions noting types of documents and, in some cases, the purpose of the materials, i.e. a specific department, program, or project.

The boxes categorized, as "Writings" by previous ARC staff were the most problematic portions of the records to address and encompassed more than half of the collection. The documents, often loose and intermixed, had to be sorted extensively into the identified series and sub-series. As the project team continued to work, some organizational charts were discovered mid-way through the project. These charts showing the departments and workflows helped in simplifying the series outline and allowed ARC's project team to determine to a better degree what types of programs and projects FSC/LAF was involved in, as well as how the multitude of separate organizational records fit into the collection. For example, at the start of the survey, we were not sure how to categorize materials for the Panola Land Buyers Association (PLBA), the Black Belt Community Health Center (BBCHC), or the Consortium of the Development for the Rural Southeast (CDRS). The organizational charts, once located, defined the PLBA and BBCHC as subsidiary organizations with separate charters coordinated through FSC/LAF, whereas it seems the CDRS was a partnership organization. As the team worked to sort, the series outline continued to evolve, which in the end generated a specifically identified way to organize the records in the future.

The collection survey and preliminary container listing have made the records of FSC/LAF and ELF accessible for both research and future archival processing and preservation. The existing survey spreadsheets can be sorted by series and sub-series allowing the project team to only pull specific groups of records to arrange and re-house in smaller portions, completing work on each grouping of files individually for incorporation into the whole collection. ARC now knows how many boxes are contained in each series and sub-series group and approximately how much work needs to be done on the materials, including the level of arrangement required. The work done has made the collection manageable in regards to access for research and archival processing and the trepidation of dealing with almost 800 boxes of disheveled records has been abated.

The physical scope of the FSC/LAF records at 643 linear feet and their unorganized state did cause the project team to take longer than the allocated seven months defined in the work plan for the 2018 NEH grant to survey and create a container listing. The team was able to finish the bulk of the work on the FSC/LAF by the end of Feb 2019 (10 Months) leaving only 78 linear feet pending. The ELF records at 135 linear feet though disorganized at the group level did have in general, a file unit structure, and the team was able to complete the collection survey and container listing within the last two months of the project period in early 2019. Finalizing the processing plans, collection survey spreadsheets, and consolidating the container listings from multiple staff took two extra months, from May to June 2019. Overall the project team was able to complete the bulk of the deliverable work in 14 months rather than the planned 12 months allocated under the timeline for the project.

Processing Action Plans and Research Significance Expanded

Moving forward, the project team will not be able to fully apply the Greene-Meissner model of minimal processing for the FSC/LAF records due to their previous lack of internal organization.⁶ At present, the HCRR Foundations project has provided the building blocks necessary to implement the full archival processing (arrangement, description, and preservation) of the FSC/LAF and ELF records and open the collections for research. The processing plans in place estimate the FSC/LAF records will take 24 months to complete at a processing rate of 20 to

⁶ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner. "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing." *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005).

30 hours per linear foot for 481 linear feet of mixed and unsorted materials. The ELF collection, with its established file units will be processed at a rate of 10 to 20 hours per linear foot for 134 linear feet and, where possible, elements of the Greene-Meissner model of minimal processing will occur expediting the physical work. The collected publications within the records were weeded extensively to remove collected governmental publications and duplication and are now physically separated from the records to be assessed for cataloging and inclusion in ARC's library collection. This project also allowed ARC to digitize 50 hours of magnetic moving image and sound recordings for researcher access, as well as complete preliminary content description and preservation assessment of 8mm and 16mm film and U-matic formatted video from the collection. This information will assist ARC in outsourcing the films and video to a specialist vendor for digitization.

The accessibility of the FSC/LAF and ELF collections will allow for the hidden history of the African American cooperative tradition to be explored further in the American historical narrative. These records can be used to investigate the impact cooperative systems have had on Black communities throughout the southern United States, as well as highlight the success of community-based economic development in defense of racial economic inequality. Other areas of scholarship include the study of Black migration through the contributions of cooperatives and the United States government's legislation and policy of federal assistance. The government's funding assistance to rural cooperatives was intended to reduce and counter African American migration to urban areas. The FSC/LAF and ELF records document this government goal extensively, as well as the response of White opposition to the links between Black cooperative development and political power to reduce poverty for local Black populations. The records highlight the extreme hostility toward the advancement of African Americans in the realms of social justice and economic independence within the racially segregated politics of the south.

Correspondence, interviews, and other documents connect the efforts on the part of FSC/LAF and ELF to the Civil Rights Movement. Prominent activists and community leaders documented within the collections include: Ralph D. Abernathy, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Richard Haley, Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King, Vernon Jordan Jr., Harry Belafonte, Karima Al-Amin, and others. Communication between the two organizations and governmental officials and agencies highlight efforts to affect governmental policy on local, state, and national levels. Correspondents include mayors (Richard Arrington Jr., Maynard Jackson), governors (Jimmy

Carter, William Clinton, Cliff Finch, Forrest "Fob" James, Lester Maddox), congressional representatives (Hosea Williams, Charles Rangel, George McGovern, Edward Kennedy, Barbara Jordan, James D. Eastland, John Conyers Jr., Shirley Chisolm), and Presidents (Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan).

The reduction in landownership and retention by African Americans was a major focus of FSC/LAF and ELF and the records provide documentation through various statistical data collected from surveys coalescing in major studies done throughout the 1970s and early 1980s on the causes of the decline. The documentation available to highlight the issue of land retention among African Americans can be seen in the FSC/LAF's work in the creation of the Panola Land Buying Association, which sought to assist sharecroppers who had been evicted from the land they farmed due to their pursuit of federal agricultural assistance. The PLBA worked to purchase nearly 1,200 acres of land in the western Black Belt of Alabama despite opposition and threats from the members of the White ruling class in the state. The ELF records provided extensive materials documenting land loss by African American farmers through a major study undertaken by the organization: The Black Heir Property Study (1979-1981). The study was and remains the most definitive study ever done to address the critical barriers to clear titles to land owned by African Americans and landowner's ability to qualify for USDA programs and services. Much of FSC/LAF and ELF's work focused on empowering black landowners by providing training, technical, and legal assistance to control their economic, political and social fate through retention and sustainable development of land.

The FSC/LAF focused their efforts of political, economic and social justice for minority communities in more arenas than farming and agriculture, resulting in extensive documentation on business development and networking, banking and loan assistance, affordable housing, youth education, and healthcare. Other areas of note for scholarship and public research within the collections include implementing neighborhood conservation and revitalization projects in low and moderate income neighborhoods; testing of the viability of small housing cooperatives in rural areas; programing to advocate at the state and federal level for legislation benefiting the rural poor; providing legal assistance to individuals and communities where resources of this nature were unavailable; and job creation and vocational training to assist economic growth in rural and poor communities. Farm worker training at the grassroots level, as well as FSC/LAF programs, such as the Small Farm Energy Conservation Program are documented within the collections and highlight

the history and use of early energy saving technology, such as solar energy. Additionally, the records focus on the organization's work to expose land fraud that affected African American landowners, mostly notable the lack of Black representation on the planning boards that led to the construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and its effects on rural Blacks in northern Alabama.

The records of the FSC/LAF and ELF that document individual farming and artistic cooperatives contribute extensively the preservation and study of the cultural heritage of African American rural communities throughout the south. The records of the individual state associations and member cooperatives within the collections are extensive particularly for the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The role of and work of sharecropping and its impact on culture and economy is highlighted in the early records for many farming cooperatives, but also for women sharecroppers seeking to help their family's income and independence after tenant evictions that left them with no income. These women used the talents of quilting and sewing in the home, passed down generation after generation, to start new cooperative business ventures, such as the Freedom Quilting Bee and the Greene Hale Sewing Cooperative in Alabama. Additionally, these cooperative communities not only fought against the monopolies White landowners had on goods, services, purchasing and distribution, but also came together to celebrate artistic, religious, and musical traditions passed down from one generation to the next. Lively meetings of the cooperatives were educational and social affairs. One example of cultural heritage promotion resulting from cooperative ventures is the Plaisance Louisiana Zydeco Festival to promote Creole music and musicians in rural St. Landry Parish. This festival grew out of the meetings and management of the Grand Marie Vegetable Producers Co-op.

The records serve as documentary evidence of American agriculture and farming cooperatives, particularly those created and utilized by African American farmers and landowners, to subsequent generations. The records will also function as a reminder of the field's viability in the realms of business, green initiatives, finance, and advocacy that has continued well into the 21st century. These two vast collections of historical records were completely inaccessible for more than 30 years and now, with renewed interest in agriculture and foodways, researchers who wish to view the FSC/LAF and ELF records at the ARC can do so.

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